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From Violence to Moderation

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya
and al-Jihad

Amr Hamzawy
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Summary

Recognition by Egypt's leading Jihadists that violence has failed to achieve political change and in fact has been counterproductive has led them to a remarkable change of course.

After years of violent confrontation with the Egyptian government and society, and defeat by the country's security forces, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and, later, segments of al-Jihad have accepted their failure to radically change society and politics, and to recognize the harm that their violent activities—formerly justified using religious concepts—have inflicted on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These developments have given rise to a Jihadi revisionism that renounces violence and redefines attitudes toward the state, politics, and society. The same Islamic concepts that once were used to justify violence have been redefined to sanction and urge nonviolent social and political activism. Revisionist documents outline a careful cost-benefit analysis that effectively rules out the use of violence to achieve the groups' goals.

A variety of factors prevent al-Jama'a and al-Jihad from fully implementing these reformed views, such as the Egyptian regime's refusal to allow members of either group to reintegrate into the country's political and social fabric and al-Jihad's specific challenge of disseminating revisionist ideas throughout its fragmented movement that still largely condones violence. However, Jihadi revisionism has led both groups to forego violence and has shifted Egypt's Islamist spectrum toward moderation.

Failure to Change Society and Politics— Contextualizing Jihadi Revisionism

Since the 1970s, two major sets of actors have dominated the Islamist opposition spectrum in Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood and a variety of Jihadi groups, most notably al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad. Throughout the past four decades, the Muslim Brotherhood has come to commit to nonviolent social activism and peaceful political participation in Egypt's semiauthoritarian environment.¹ In spite of its past ambivalence regarding the use of violence for political purposes and its formation of a paramilitary wing during the 1940s and 1950s, the Brotherhood has clearly renounced violence, which it views as a violation of true Islamic teachings, and developed a firm belief in the value of gradual and peaceful efforts to reform society and politics in accordance with Islam.

Neither the weak outcome of its political participation, nor systematic regime repression—for example, frequent arrests and trials of Brotherhood leaders and activists, manipulation against its candidates in elections, and the limiting of the movement's social and political activities through a mixture of legal measures and direct government intervention—have pushed the Brotherhood away from its commitment to nonviolent activism and peaceful participation. And while some voices within the Brotherhood have recently called for a temporary moratorium on participation in parliament until Egypt's semiauthoritarian political environment improves, the movement's commitment to nonviolent activism remains unchanged.

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad have represented a counter model to the Muslim Brotherhood since their establishment in the 1970s. Until the 1990s, these groups shaped their religious and social activism around a readiness to use violence for political purposes. They rejected the reformist ideology of the Brotherhood and accused it of becoming a domesticated opposition movement destined to remain weak so long as it participates in politics. Jihadists opted to try to radically change society and politics by abolishing the existing regime—which they labeled infidel—and violently taking over state power. For them, this seemed the only viable way to (re)-establish a “true Islamic state and society.” After al-Jihad's assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, both groups entered a phase of violent confrontation with the state security forces that persisted throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s. State security forces began to secure victory in the bloody confrontation with Jihadists in the second half of the 1990s, with scores of the latter killed, imprisoned, or exiled. Despite a brief period of political liberalization between 1976 and 1990, Egypt was once again turning into a police state ruled by emergency laws and presidential decrees.

By the end of the 1990s, the victory of the security forces over Jihadists was inevitable, and Jihadi attempts to violently change society and politics had

clearly failed. These intertwined realities helped lay the ground for key changes that have come to shape Egyptian politics in recent years. The victory of the security forces enabled the ruling regime of President Hosni Mubarak to shift its attention, under growing domestic pressures, to implementing minor political reforms designed to reintroduce a measure of liberalization to Egyptian politics. These political reforms, implemented mainly between 2002 and 2007, have neither mitigated the regime's dominance nor strengthened the weak opposition, but they have created a greater degree of pluralism and competition in Egyptian politics. The Muslim Brotherhood has capitalized upon this partial political opening by finding its way back to meaningful representation in parliament starting in 2000, after a decade of outright exclusion.²

The Brotherhood has also regained a measure of its previous prominence within Egypt's Islamist spectrum. In light of the failure of Jihadi violence and extremism to change society and politics, the reformist ideology and commitment to peaceful activism of the Muslim Brotherhood, discredited by al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad in the past as ineffective and weak, have proved to be the Islamists' only viable means to engage in religious, social, and political activities in Egypt. The Brotherhood, whose ideology and activism have come to be an integral part of the Egyptian public sphere, has restored its status as the main representative of oppositional political Islam. As for al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad, their failure to violently enact change has triggered a process of self-critique and revisionism in which both groups have questioned the pillars of their ideologies and activism, including the religious justification of violence and a radical conception of society and politics.

The revisionism of Egyptian Jihadists has not been solely a product of decisive defeat at the hands of the state security forces. By the second half of the 1990s, both al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad were struggling to overcome stagnant leadership and a growing inability to attract young recruits. Organizationally, they were both on a downward spiral.³ The ideological appeal of radical Jihadism was greatly damaged by violent confrontation with the state and the suffering that this conflict inflicted upon Egyptian society. Segments of religiously motivated Egyptians were shifting away from Jihadism, either to rediscover the value of the Brotherhood's nonviolent activism or to embrace new forms of religiously based civil society activities, such as providing social services to the poor, revitalizing religious endowment, and preaching among young Egyptians.

In the case of al-Jama'a al-Islamiya, the revisionism—which was led by imprisoned leaders starting in 1997—culminated in the group's total renunciation of violence in 2002 and a commitment to peaceful activism by accepting the legitimacy of the state and the ruling regime.⁴ In the case of al-Jihad, a belated revisionism circulating once again among prisoners has recently inspired segments of the group to embark on the same road of renouncing violence and changing their conception of society and politics. In 2007 Sayyid

Imam al-Sharif, one of al-Jihad's leading ideologues, issued from prison his widely debated revisionist document "Rationalizing Jihadi Work in Egypt and the World."⁵ In this document al-Sharif delegitimizes the use of violence in Muslim as well as non-Muslim countries and prohibits armed rebellion against Muslim rulers. Unlike al-Jama'a al-Islamiya, al-Jihad's revisionism has remained contested within the group, and al-Sharif's document has been both praised and denounced.

Significantly, the revisionism of al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and segments of al-Jihad has not stopped at renouncing and delegitimizing the use of violence. It has developed, albeit in different ways, a new set of ideas and views centered on nonviolent Jihadi activism. Before delving into a detailed analysis of these ideas and views—primarily related to how society, state, and politics are understood—three remarks help to contextualize Jihadi revisionism.

First, the fact that many of the prominent revisionist voices in al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad were or are still imprisoned in Egypt does not diminish the credibility of their renunciation of violence or their refutation of extremism. Many of these revisionist leaders have engaged in dialogue with the security forces, and some have exchanged ideas with religious scholars and intellectuals close to the Egyptian regime. However, their new ideas and views have evolved genuinely and cannot be reduced to a simplistic, conspiracy-driven, extortionist explanation. According to Kamal Habib, a former leader of al-Jihad, the revisionism of al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad followed several years of extensive debate and multiple attempts to launch their initiatives to renounce violence.⁶ Habib concludes that Jihadi revisionism has neither been a product of coercion, nor a "get out of jail free" card.⁷ Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya has upheld its commitment to nonviolence since 1997, and although al-Jihad has been divided in relation to renouncing violence, the group has abstained from violent activities in Egypt throughout the last ten years.

Second, although Jihadists historically contested the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood within the Islamist spectrum and discredited its reformist ideology, Jihadi revisionism clearly has been inspired—religiously and politically—by the Brotherhood. Many of Jihadists' reformed ideas and views on society and politics, the state, and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims have drawn significantly from the Brotherhood's contemporary ideology and discourse.

Third, while al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and the revisionist segments of al-Jihad have upheld their commitment to nonviolence, their commitment to peaceful participation in Egyptian society and politics has yet to be validated. The more proactive element of Jihadi revisionism has remained purely rhetorical, articulated in pronouncements but never realized in actions. Several factors help explain the current lack of nonviolent Jihadi activism. Although the ruling regime in Egypt has welcomed—and promoted—the renunciation of violence, it has remained reluctant to allow or facilitate al-Jama'a al-Islamiya's

and al-Jihad's reintegration into the social and political spheres. In fact, it has treated the revisionism in a security-driven manner, focusing almost exclusively on ensuring that the two groups will not resort to violence again and ignoring the need to engage their leaders and activists.⁸ Individual revisionist leaders have been released from Egyptian prisons but have not been permitted to reorganize or join existing Islamist networks and organizations. Furthermore, the two groups' organizational strength and popular constituencies were weakened during their violent confrontations with the state, and neither has been able to rebuild these components. This overall lack of organizational resources has prevented revisionist Jihadists from putting their new ideas into practice.

Revisionist Ideas and Views on Society, State, and Politics

Jihadi revisionism began essentially as an acknowledgment that violence and extremism had failed to change Egyptian society and politics. From 1997 to 1999⁹ imprisoned leaders of al-Jama'a al-Islamiya initiated a process of self-criticism and entered into dialogue with moderate religious scholars and intellectuals. Revisionists stressed the importance of introspection, which would allow al-Jama'a to reflect upon and distance itself from past mistakes, and to correct the path of Jihad.¹⁰ They saw the need to stop (and, if possible, rectify) the damage that the use of violence had inflicted on Muslims and non-Muslims, Egyptian society, and al-Jama'a itself.¹¹ Years later, al-Jihad's ideologue Sayyid Imam al-Sharif underwent the same process, this time encountering in prison the revisionist thinking of al-Jama'a al-Islamiya. He echoed its rationale of stepping back to take a critical look at Jihadi activism and where Muslims stand after years of incurring the costs of violence and extremism.¹²

A remarkable transformation has resulted from both experiences: Al-Jama'a and al-Jihad have issued documents significantly revising the ideological and religious underpinnings to which they had so fundamentally clung in justifying the use of violence. The concepts of *takfir* (accusing other Muslims of being infidels), *hisba* (the duty of Muslims to call for good and ban evil), and even of Jihad itself—all previously understood in a way that sanctioned violence—have been moderated and redefined along nonviolent lines. In fact, revisionist leaders in both al-Jama'a and al-Jihad maintain that for decades—specifically since the 1960s, which witnessed the execution of Muslim Brotherhood's thinker Sayyid Qutb and the subsequent radicalization of Egypt's Islamist spectrum¹³—misguided interpretations of these principles have damaged the strength and self-proclaimed integrity of Jihadism.¹⁴ In the revisionist documents, extremism is declared to be contrary to the true teachings of Islam, and

violent Jihadi activism is banned as detrimental to the interests of individual Muslims and Muslim society.¹⁵

The revisionist leaders of al-Jama'a al-Islamiya note several root causes of Jihadi extremism, most notably a simplistic reading of religious texts that exaggerates the significance of bans and restrictions in Islam, as well as a poor understanding of the realities of religion, society, and politics.¹⁶ In search of an ideal Islamic society, violent Jihadists deviated from the true path of Islam,¹⁷ which envisages only gradual reform and peaceful activism to achieve one's goals.¹⁸ Revisionist leaders, in keeping with this moderate Islamic vision, and in direct contradiction to the approach of violent Jihadists, seek to ameliorate the environment of fear and conflict that the Jihadists created by advocating nonviolent initiatives.¹⁹

Society

As one of the central concepts of Jihadi revisionism, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad put forward a rational analysis that weighs the benefits and consequences of Jihadi activities for individuals and societies. At the core of this cost-benefit analysis are two notions: a belated Jihadi readiness to differentiate between essential and secondary interests (*maqasad*) of the Muslim *umma* (the global Muslim community) and individual Muslims, and Jihadists' resulting obligation to prioritize the former interests over the latter. Similar to conventional religious interpretations, Jihadi revisionist writings identify the protection of each Muslim's religion, soul, mind, family, and prosperity as the essential interests.²⁰ Secondary interests, on the other hand, include the upholding of high standards of religious morality, the implementation of *shari'a* (Islamic law) in all walks of life, and the Islamization of public policies and official decrees.²¹ Therefore, Jihadi revisionist voices have stated clearly that attempts to uphold high standards of morality should not be pursued at the cost of Muslim lives, and confrontations with ruling regimes that do not implement *shari'a* should not come at the expense of the essential interest of protecting the peace and prosperity of the *umma*.

The Jihadi cost-benefit analysis is manifested clearly in the revisionist leaders' redefinition of the parameters of performing Jihad. In its revisionist documents, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya confesses that it pursued violent Jihad for years as an end rather than a means, failing to take into account the devastating toll that its ostensibly righteous goal was taking on Egyptian society. Al-Jama'a's revised understanding of Jihad is based on the principle that shedding blood in the name of Islam is prohibited unless violent Jihad will help protect and strengthen Islam and the *umma* beyond a shadow of a doubt and at minimal cost.²²

Sayyid Imam al-Sharif of al-Jihad outlines in his revisionist document specific preconditions, both individual and collective, for the waging of violent Jihad—so much so that he practically forbids it. Al-Sharif asserts that

individual Muslims are forbidden to perform violent Jihad if they do so against their parents' will, if they are indebted to someone, or if the related activities endanger the life of the Jihadist or his family.²³ At the collective level, al-Sharif incorporates the concept of ability (*al-qudra*) in his revised preconditions for performing violent Jihad: If Jihadists do not possess strength comparable to that of their enemies (whether rulers in Muslim countries who do not rule in accordance with Islam or foreign powers occupying Muslim countries), they are forbidden from acting violently against these powers.²⁴ Furthermore, Jihad is declared illegitimate if Muslims do not have sufficient material means—monetary or otherwise—to successfully wage it, or if Jihad is carried out via wrongdoing, for example theft or the killing of innocent civilians.²⁵

Following the same path of moderation, Jihadi revisionism imposes limits on the practice of *takfir* and *hisba*. Before renouncing violence, both al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad justified countless acts of violence against Muslim and non-Muslim civilians in Egypt by condemning those people as unbelievers or infidels based on an extremist understanding of what constitutes true Islam. In the revisionist documents, this practice of *takfir* is banned as a type of evil that negates justice; leads to *fitna*, or discord within the Muslim community; and disrupts social peace between Muslims and non-Muslim civilians—primarily the People of the Book, i.e., Christians and Jews—thus closing the door to constructive compromise between different groups in society.²⁶ In backing away from the practice of *takfir* in relation to fellow Muslims, Jihadi revisionism re-establishes that a person's faith is a private matter known only to God. It cannot be determined by outward behavior, and individual Muslims do not possess the religious authority to condemn others as unbelievers.²⁷ The grave accusation of *takfir* can be leveled only by qualified religious scholars in extreme circumstances and in accordance with the respective society's binding laws. Before retribution toward those condemned as unbelievers or infidels is even considered, they must be given ample opportunity to accurately understand the teachings of Islam and return to the faith.²⁸ These limits amount to a virtual ban of *takfir* against Muslims.

The concept of *hisba* is also redefined in Jihadi revisionism to justify the renunciation of violence and initiate a process of moderation within al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad. *Hisba*, interpreted in conventional Islamic teachings as a way to protect Muslim communities from within, was long abused by Jihadists. Al-Jama'a and al-Jihad tried to assume the role of Egypt's morality police, considering themselves fit to identify acts of evil and rectify them under their own system of justice. During the 1980s and 1990s they practiced *hisba* according to their absolutist discernment of right and wrong and attempted to violently punish those they considered in violation of Islam. Their acts of violence included attacks on unveiled women, assaults on artists and artistic venues, the demolition of television sets, the destruction of shops selling

or renting videotapes, vandalism and destruction of places of prostitution or drinking, and physical punishment of those who drink, pray in a way unacceptable to Jihadists, or otherwise violate their strict moral code.²⁹

In the revisionist documents, Jihadists correct what had come to be an egregious misinterpretation of *hisba* responsible for violence and social tensions in Egypt. First and foremost, the revisionist documents redefine *hisba* along nonviolent lines: the duty to call for good and ban evil means to rectify wrongdoings through peaceful methods such as *da'wa* (proselytizing efforts) counseling and advice, and—in rare circumstances—reminding Muslims of God's punishments.³⁰ Similar to *takfir*, the practice of *hisba* must be delegated to the appropriate authorities—in this case, to the Egyptian state. As with the revised concept of Jihad, specific preconditions and careful cost-benefit analysis must precede a Muslim's decision to perform *hisba*: The individual must be undoubtedly able to uphold Islamic precepts without bringing harm to himself or his family and without risking a spike in fear, agitation, or further violence within the Muslim community.³¹

Redefining the concepts of Jihad, *takfir*, and *hisba* out of a necessity and a conviction to find ways around using violence has allowed al-Jama'a al-Islamiya, and to a lesser extent the revisionist segments of al-Jihad, to begin repairing their societal relationships. Confrontation with mainstream society, which the two groups previously considered infidel, has come to an end with the relinquishing of *takfir* and a new nonviolent approach toward *hisba*. Revisionist views regarding the treatment of non-Muslims in Egypt have also altered social dynamics for al-Jama'a and al-Jihad. Several times over the past few years, al-Jama'a has expressed its respect for the lives and basic interests of Christians and Jews and its intention not to harm them as long as they reciprocally choose to live in peace with Muslims.³² In their revisionist documents, al-Jama'a and al-Jihad elaborate that Christians and Jews must be guaranteed safety, although the code of *dhimmitude*, which stipulates their rights and duties in Muslim countries, only applies to states ruled by *shari'a*.³³ The end effect has been to alleviate, if slightly, the strain Jihadists once put on Egypt's social fabric through violence against Muslims and non-Muslims and to begin al-Jama'a and al-Jihad's long road to reconciliation with society.

State

Jihadi revisionism, however, has not simply been a proclamation of what practices Jihadist groups will abstain from in the future. Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya, and to a very limited degree al-Jihad, have articulated new ideas and views regarding the state and politics. Years of bloody and aimless confrontation with the Egyptian regime prompted Jihadists to re-examine the value of their struggle and its religious underpinnings, which in retrospect proved unsound. In an attempt to correct their understanding of the state, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and segments of al-Jihad have forbidden violent rebellion against the ruler (*al-hakim*),

regardless of whether he governs in accordance with Islam. More significantly, in the revisionist documents, al-Jama'a and al-Jihad indirectly recognize the legitimacy of the state by conceding governance to it, and even acknowledge it as an institution well-equipped to defend Islam, implement *shari'a* where political will exists, and protect the interests of Muslims and non-Muslims.

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya in particular has revisited its unyielding view of the Egyptian state as an entity ruled by an infidel regime, which (in the group's thinking) justified and even necessitated violence against the state as an enemy of Islam during the 1980s and 1990s. In the revisionist documents, al-Jama'a contends that common extenuating circumstances permit the toleration of a regime that does not implement *shari'a* to the fullest or govern in accordance with Islam; it cannot simply be declared apostate. Indeed, regimes might have significant reasons not to implement *shari'a* in Muslim countries, such as a lack of societal consensus on the matter or the risk of tensions between different religious communities. Furthermore, the "failure" of regimes to govern in accordance with Islam is more often a sign of rulers' negligence than disbelief, and their governance thus cannot be judged as a reflection of their souls.³⁴

Even in the rare case that qualified religious authorities accuse the ruler of a Muslim country of being an infidel, both al-Jama'a and al-Jihad ban violent rebellion against him. According to Jihadi revisionism's recurring concept of societal cost-benefit analysis as well as the specific preconditions for waging Jihad that individuals and groups must satisfy, violence is not sanctioned as a way to resist infidel rulers or regimes. In their documents, Jihadi revisionist leaders admit that no situation in which their groups took up arms against the Egyptian regime has met these criteria. Therefore, the struggle of al-Jama'a and al-Jihad against the regime has constituted not just costly, but illegitimate, violence.³⁵

Notably, Jihadi revisionism offers peaceful methods to resist regimes that do not govern in accordance with Islam in an attempt to provide alternatives to violent rebellion. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif of al-Jihad devotes a section of "Rationalizing Jihadi Work in Egypt and the World" to explaining that even if a ruler of a Muslim country truly is infidel, Islam calls upon Muslims to be patient and refrain from violently turning against him. Practicing *da'wa*, non-violent social activism, or even leaving the country can prove effective in the struggle against infidel rulers.³⁶ According to al-Sharif, Muslims must prudently choose from these methods based on circumstances on the ground, their abilities, and the necessity of limiting damage inflicted upon the society at large.³⁷

Al-Jama'a's and segments of al-Jihad's de facto acceptance of rulers and regimes that do not rule in accordance with Islam and their endorsement of peaceful solutions to these situations signal a remarkably pacifist attitude toward the state.³⁸ In essence, Jihadi revisionism accepts the possibility of rulers' deviation from Islam for extended periods of time without sanctioning violent resistance against them.

In their revised views on the state, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad go beyond merely banning violence against rulers and regimes. They accept the legal and constitutional framework of the state as binding and concede governance to it in key political issues such as implementing *shari'a* and capital punishment, discerning treatment of non-Muslims, managing domestic and external security matters, declaring war, signing peace treaties, and allowing non-Muslim tourists to visit Muslim countries.³⁹ Because these issues are all within the realm of state sovereignty, non-state actors such as Jihadi groups or individual Jihadists are not justified in attempting to gain leverage over them through violent or coercive means.⁴⁰ In "Rationalizing Jihadi Work in Egypt and the World," al-Sharif extends the obligation of Muslims vis-à-vis the state to Muslim communities living in predominantly non-Muslim societies, calling upon them to obey the appropriate state authorities.⁴¹

Taken together, the Jihadists' revised views on the state represent a fundamental shift away from their denial of state legitimacy, their former attempts to violently assume a role in society through violent means under the rationale of *takfir* and *hisba*, and their past intentions to take over the state's institutions and reform them along the lines of an idealized Islamic state. In the revisionist documents, rather than prosecuting the state under their own system of justice or taking matters into their own hands, Egyptian Jihadists amended their objectives to be: 1) compliance with the state, 2) nonviolent assistance to state institutions, rulers, and regimes to govern in accordance with Islam, and 3) nonviolent opposition to laws, policies, or decisions that contradict Islam.⁴²

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya has further conceded in its revisionist documents that piety and knowledge of Islam do not qualify religious leaders to be heads of state. Rather, governance is correctly placed in the hands of temporal rulers, who may possess a "special capability" to govern despite their lack of religious qualifications.⁴³ In a remarkable statement, former al-Jama'a leader Najih Ibrahim even admits that the Egyptian Jihadi movement—along with the global Jihadi movement—"went through long periods of time in which it was not qualified for government," as evidenced by the failure of the Taliban regime to provide good governance in Afghanistan, the negative experiences of the Islamic Courts in Somalia and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, and, most significantly, the Egyptian Jihadists' 1981 assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat.⁴⁴

Finally, Jihadi revisionist documents recognize the state not only as a legitimate institution that warrants compliance, but as an institution fit to defend Islam and serve Muslims' essential interests. Where political will exists, the state can implement *shari'a* and render *hisba*, thus complementing and even advancing the objectives of Jihadists. In select writings, revisionist voices in al-Jama'a al-Islamiya have even expressed something akin to dependency upon the Egyptian state in defending Muslims in Egypt and abroad. Revisionists such as Najih Ibrahim say al-Jama'a has halted its violence against the regime

partly because “Egypt is the most qualified state for repulsing any aggression against the Muslim and Arab nation,” having historically defeated many invaders.⁴⁵ Committing acts of violence against the regime in the past distracted the Egyptian state from its duty to combat external threats, weakening the *umma* and harming the essential interests of Muslims.⁴⁶

Politics

For many Islamist groups—especially Egyptian Jihadists and the Muslim Brotherhood—a key measure of moderation is whether nonviolent political participation is internally accepted, indicating whether the group truly embraces the ideas of pluralism and peaceful competition in society. Al-Jihad, a fragmented group with many components outside Egypt still lobbying for violence, has yet to put forth a roadmap for a nonviolent approach toward politics. However, al-Jama’*a* al-Islamiya has undoubtedly moved toward embracing political participation and accepting the right of other political forces to exist. In various statements, al-Jama’*a* has voiced its interest in eventually contesting elections and participating in parliamentary politics, recognized pluralism in both the Islamist spectrum and the broader Egyptian political sphere, and shown an appreciation for other elements of democratic governance.

In a clear change from its previous denunciation of the politically active Muslim Brotherhood, al-Jama’*a* endorses political participation in its revisionist documents as an acceptable way to achieve key Islamist objectives such as full implementation of *shari’*a**, Islamization of society through the adoption of higher moral standards, and the protection of Muslims’ essential interests. Revisionist leaders in al-Jama’*a* also view political participation as an opportunity to begin integrating into Egypt’s political scene as a legal, nonviolent group.⁴⁷ However, political participation is clarified as not an end goal, but one of many nonviolent means to effect positive change. If the participation of nonviolent Jihadists in parliaments and other legislative bodies proves ineffective in promoting Islam and reforming society, their presence is no longer necessary.⁴⁸

The possibility of al-Jama’*a* al-Islamiya’s leaders or members participating in Egyptian politics is slim to none, at least for the time being. Although the Egyptian regime promoted Jihadi revisionism and renunciation of violence, it has treated the re-emergence of the groups from political and social exclusion as a security matter, actively rejecting their inclusion in politics and obstructing their attempts to perform *da’*wa** or nonviolent social activities by imposing legal and de facto restrictions upon them. Revisionist leaders in al-Jama’*a* have acknowledged that it is in the group’s strategic interest to stay away from politics until it can re-establish a “relationship of trust” with the state. In a recent interview, Najih Ibrahim argued that the difficulties surrounding the political inclusion of al-Jama’*a* have prompted it to postpone attempts in this regard, and instead focus on entry points into society such as *da’*wa** and the provision of social services.⁴⁹

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya's changed view of politics is also reflected in its acceptance of pluralism through acknowledging the existence of actors it has previously tried to delegitimize, attack, or force out of politics. Prior to its revisionism, al-Jama'a embraced a violent, exclusivist view of politics and refused to recognize the right of most political forces to be active, develop platforms, or spread their ideas in society. In fact, its stance was based on a total negation of pluralism in society and politics outside the parameters of a narrowly interpreted Islam.⁵⁰ In terms of secular forces, al-Jama'a and al-Jihad declared *takfir* on liberal and leftist Egyptians, accusing them of being non-Muslims.⁵¹ Although the post-revisionist al-Jama'a still denounces secular ideologies, it has come to recognize these forces' existence as a permanent part of Egyptian society and politics, constituting a slight move toward a de facto acceptance of diversity and pluralism.⁵²

Within the Egyptian Islamist spectrum, which in the past has been characterized by antagonism between Jihadi extremism and the reformist ideology put forth by the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya has come to fully embrace pluralism. The group has revised its understanding of Islam to encompass a variety of religious, social, and political interpretations and now recognizes the existence and historical significance of the Muslim Brotherhood as a group that has served the cause of Islam well.⁵³ Al-Jama'a states in its revisionist documents that the Brotherhood's reformist ideology represents an important component of the Islamist spectrum, and it even indirectly expresses a duty to protect the Brotherhood's right to participate peacefully in society and politics.⁵⁴

Revisionists confess that in the past, al-Jama'a's violent confrontation with the Egyptian regime enabled the latter to repress and contain nonviolent Islamist groups, most prominently the Brotherhood.⁵⁵ Recognizing the consequences of its actions, al-Jama'a no longer intends to pursue policies that bring retribution upon other Islamists, because the diversity and dynamism of the Islamist spectrum—including its participation-oriented segments—are in accordance with Muslim interests.⁵⁶

These ideas represent a significant break with Jihadists' previous accusations that the Muslim Brotherhood has degenerated into a domesticated opposition movement and diluted the true teachings of Islam in order to accommodate partisan politics and the interests of the regime. Although al-Jama'a continues to denounce secular forces and ideologies, it now has a much broader understanding of what constitutes an acceptable interpretation of Islam and how to advance its cause in society and politics.⁵⁷

Al-Jama'a's ideological and rhetorical embrace of participation and limited pluralism has led to a growing openness toward additional elements of democratic governance. In statements and press interviews, revisionist Jihadists have publicly expressed their acceptance of the peaceful transfer of power through "legitimate legal frames and mechanisms of effective political contribution,"

and of the role of civil society in contributing to decision-making processes.⁵⁸ Najih Ibrahim has expressed regret on behalf of al-Jama'a that the group's violent confrontation with the regime has hindered the promotion of democratic reform in Egypt, signaling that al-Jama'a's revised vision for Egyptian politics is democratic.⁵⁹ This type of statement is fundamentally different from pre-revisionism political rhetoric, which stressed the group's desire for an Islamic state, rejected all other models, and denounced political participation as an act of submission to the regime. Jihadi groups' revised ideas and views on politics represent a partial moderation, and their stances continue to evolve closer toward those of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Accounting for the Discrepancies Between al-Jama'a's and al-Jihad's Revisionism

Both al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad have renounced violence and revised their previously extremist views on society and the state. However, a striking discrepancy exists between the groups' revisionist documents: Al-Sharif's "Rationalizing Jihadi Work in Egypt and the World" denounces violence but, unlike the extensive collection of al-Jama'a, generally fails to offer constructive, nonviolent visions of the state, society, or politics. Discussions of political participation, pluralism, and other elements of democracy are nowhere to be found, and many of al-Jihad's revisionist views on society and the state lack the complexity of its revisionist counterpart.

Two main factors help account for this discrepancy. First, al-Jihad's revisionism is a relatively new development, as its literature was first circulated in 2007. The group has not had ample time to develop its ideas past the renunciation of violence or to meaningfully engage the public sphere.⁶⁰ Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya, on the other hand, released its initial revisionist documents almost a decade ago and garnered the extensive interest of the Egyptian public. Since then, its revisionist ideas have continued to evolve. Meaningful comparison between the revisionism of al-Jama'a and al-Jihad cannot take place until the latter has had the opportunity to continue its trajectory of reform and moderation.

Secondly, unlike al-Jama'a, al-Jihad has become a highly fragmented group unable to speak with a cohesive voice, and it lacks the internal solidarity to produce an extensive body of revisionist documents. Far from presenting a unified initiative for renouncing violence and ending extremism, the publication of "Rationalizing Jihadi Work in Egypt and the World" has sparked vitriolic, public debates within al-Jihad—including a widely circulated refutation of al-Sharif's document by Ayman al-Zawahiri, a top al-Qaeda leader. Al-Jihad is deeply split between its remaining domestic component in Egypt and its globalized branches, which have either joined the al-Qaeda network or disintegrated organizationally via exile in Europe. Reconciling these branches and uniting them behind a cause alien to the essence of the group is currently an insurmountable task for al-Jihad's revisionist segments.⁶¹

Impacts of Revisionism

Despite the significance of al-Jama'a's and al-Jihad's ideological revision, impacts on the ground have been rather limited. Although al-Jama'a al-Islamiya has moved closer to the nonviolent Muslim Brotherhood in its views and activities, it has been decisively blocked from reintegrating into Egypt's political and social spheres. However, al-Jama'a's revisionism has added another element of religious and ideological moderation to Egypt's Islamist spectrum, helping shift the spectrum as a whole toward peaceful activism and political participation.

It is difficult to predict what change, if any, al-Jihad will undergo. The current influence of Sayyid Imam al-Sharif's revisionist document within such a divided and globalized group is contested, despite the fact that he was formerly one of its most influential ideologues and even wrote the radical documents that shaped al-Jihad's extremism for decades. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif aside, there are various signs that Jihadi groups such as al-Jihad have recently undergone ideological, structural, and generational shifts that mitigate the effects of new ideas. Ideologically, groups no longer doggedly ground their actions in religious rationale (or, according to revisionists, misinterpretation of religious precepts). While Jihadists' ideological indoctrination used to be rigorous and sophisticated, imbuing recruits with the significance of ultimate goals and the justification to achieve them through any means necessary, no such training exists in today's global movement.⁶² Structurally, because al-Jihad—like other Jihadi groups—is a dispersed organization without central leadership, influential ideas cannot be disseminated in a top-down fashion. Generationally, the goals and worldview of the younger Jihadists, who constitute the bulk of al-Jihad membership, diverge drastically from those of their predecessors. Members are now generally frustrated and often bored youths seeking the immediate fruits of joining the Jihadi movement.⁶³ In such a context, revisionist ideas and views are likely to be somewhat obsolete.

Notes

- 1 The Muslim Brotherhood was established in 1928 and allowed to operate legally until the 1950s. In the early 1950s, the Brotherhood was banned, and its activities—religious, social, and political—were prohibited. In the 1970s the movement was allowed to re-enter spheres of religious and social activism and to operate in the political sphere by contesting legislative elections in a nonthreatening fashion. The partial inclusion of the Brotherhood has continued, although it has been marred by frequent phases of regime repression.
- 2 In the parliamentary elections of 2000, the Muslim Brotherhood secured 5 percent representation in the People’s Assembly, the lower chamber of the Egyptian Parliament. In the elections of 2005, the Brotherhood secured an unprecedented 20 percent representation.
- 3 Husam Tamam, “muraja’at al-jama’a wal-jihad...inqilab wahmi” (The Revisions of al-Jama’a and al-Jihad...an Illusive Coup), Islam Online, June 7, 2007, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout&cid=1181062491718, pp. 1–2.
- 4 For more on the context of al-Jama’a al-Islamiya’s transformation, see Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, “The Other Face of the Islamist Movement,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper no. 33, January 2003. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/pdf/files/wp33.pdf>.
- 5 Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, “tarshid al-‘amal al-jihadi fi misr wal-‘alam” (Rationalizing Jihadi Work in Egypt and the World), Islam Online, November 18, 2007, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Daawa%2FDWALayout&cid=1195032383037.
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- 8 Ibid., p. 3.
- 9 Usama Ibrahim Hafiz and ‘Asim ‘Abd al-Majid Muhammad, “mubadarat waqf al-‘unf: ru’iya waqi’iyya wa nazra shar’iyya” (The Initiative to Stop Violence: A Realistic Vision and a Religious View), Brief Summary of Full Text, available at http://www.murajaat.com/katob_w_mohathart.php, p. 2.

- 10 'Ali Muhammad 'Ali al-Sharif and Usama Ibrahim Hafiz, "al-nush wal-tabyin fi tashih mafahim al-muhtasibin" (Advice and Clarification in Correcting the Understanding of Those Ordering Good and Forbidding Evil), available at http://www.murajaat.com/katob_w_mohathart.php, p. 1.
- 11 Hamdi 'Abd al-'Aziz, "al-jama'a al-islamiyya..asharat a'wam 'ala al-muraja'at: al-muraja'at..al-khalfiyat wal-dawafi'" (al-Jama'a al-Islamiya...Ten Years Since the Revisions: The Revisions...The Backgrounds and the Motivations), Islam Online, October 28, 2007, http://islamyoon.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1193049189085&pagename=Islamyoun/IYALayout.
- 12 Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, "dawafi' isdar al-wathiqah wal-ta'rif bil-islam" (Motivations for Publishing the Document and Informing about Islam), Islam Online, November 18, 2007, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1195032370457&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Daawa%2FDWALayout, pp. 4–5, from "tarshid al-'amal al-jihadi fi misr wal-'alam" (Rationalizing Jihadi Work in Egypt and the World).
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- 14 Ibid., p. 5.
- 15 Najih Ibrahim 'Abdullah and 'Ali Muhammad 'Ali al-Sharif, "hurmat al-ghulu fil-din wa takfir al-muslimin" (The Prohibition of Extremism in Religion and of Accusing Muslims of Being Infidels), available at http://www.murajaat.com/katob_w_mohathart.php, p. 2.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 6–7.
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- 21 Ibid., pp. 1–4.
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- 25 Ibid., p. 5.
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